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Honda starts movement to protect 'Mt. Um'

By Paul Rogers
Mercury News

With Silicon Valley spread below on one side and Monterey Bay in the distance, Congressman Mike Honda today stepped up efforts to win federal funding for a long-stalled toxics cleanup at an abandoned Air Force base on the summit of one of Santa Clara County's landmark mountain peaks.

"This will be a great education spot," said Honda, D-San Jose, at a news conference atop Mount Umunhum, located on San Jose's southern edge. "It will also offer people a reprieve from cell phones and computers. This is a great place to slow down."

Named for the Ohlone Indian word for hummingbird, the 3,486-foot peak towers above South San Jose and Los Gatos on the chaparral ridges between Lexington Reservoir and Almaden Quicksilver County Park.

Despite thousands of acres of public parkland on its slopes, most Silicon Valley residents know "Mt. Um" only for the abandoned Air Force radar building that looks like a sugar cube on its summit. The Air Force closed the Almaden Air Force Station in the early 1980s and sold the peak in 1986 to a government parks agency, the Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District.

Since the late 1970s, the open space district, based in Los Altos and funded by property taxes, has been buying land across the mountain. It now owns more than 15,000 acres, open for hiking, biking and horse riding.

But the Air Force base site has sat like a ghost town, off limits to the public because it contains crumbling buildings and Quonset huts contaminated with asbestos, lead paint and solvents.

Honda and other South Bay leaders say the mountain could one day become a South Bay version of Marin County's Mount Tamalpais -- a sanctuary for wildlife with miles of trails.

But the peak's signature attribute, its summit, with stunning views of the Santa Clara Valley, San Francisco Bay and Monterey Bay, will remain closed until somebody cleans up the toxics and demolishes more than 50 condemned building.

Honda called on the U.S. Senate to include language in the 2003 defense spending bill next month that would finish clean-up work on top of the mountain. In June, he inserted language into the House version of the defense bill, calling for the Army Corps of Engineers to give priority to Mount

Umunhum among the \$212 million allotted for military base clean-ups next year.

The Total clean-up is estimated to cost \$6 million for the Mount Umunhum summit, said Craig Britton, general manager of the open space district. That would include demolishing all the buildings and removing the toxics.

IF YOU'RE INTERESTED

To find out more about the Friends of Mt. Umunhum, a new group that is advocating for public access, call Elaina Cuzick at the Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District, at (650) 691-1200, extension 511.

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